

Susan Rothenberg

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
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Susan Rothenberg

by Maurice Tuchman

Susan Rothenberg produced her first distinctive paintings in 1974, large images of a horse in lateral profile. The mute neutrality of these works reflected the "cool" and distanced posture which dominated art in the late 1960s and early '70s. Specifically, Rothenberg's work referred directly to Jasper Johns' earlier paintings. As Rothenberg herself has put it, "He was my guy!" This can be seen clearly in the overall inflection of her horse canvases by consistent flurred strokes describing figure or ground. As in Johns' paintings, the image is further unified by one main, enmeshing color. Although Rothenberg subjected the horse configuration to every sort of formal articulation and handled it at times almost as an unfeeling object, she nevertheless was concerned with a range of emotional expressiveness. There was evidence in this work of a need to communicate more articulately about states of mind than was intended in the art of many of her contemporaries. This desire to clearly illuminate fugitive sensations, even if obliquely, and to dredge up difficult aspects of reality is most apparent in the group of paintings Rothenberg has made for the present exhibition.

Rothenberg's development over the past decade may best be understood by addressing her handling of figurative motifs. Before 1974, she worked abstractly, ending up with a group of split-field paintings. From that work came "the half and the whole. Finally, I drew a line down the middle of a canvas and before I knew it, there was half a horse on either side," she recalled in 1976. For the next two years, Rothenberg rendered her horses in this format, painted with strength and finesse and with a grand authority that was quickly noticed by fellow artists and critics. In each painting, the horse form was treated in terms of four distinct formal considerations: the relationships of shape to edge, figure to ground, surface to depth, and part to whole.² As a series, the paintings "asked" whether the horse could "survive" the constraints, blockades, and radical manipulations the artist conceived for it. Overall, its soft and living quality was made to contrast with the hard surface of the canvas and the rational, cognitive process of picture-making. The artist forced the image into non-naturalis-

tic positions to intensify contrasts. She tried "everything you could do to the horse image, by tying it to geometry and putting it through the paces." The horse was stretched out to all four edges of the picture plane, locked in place by artificial "side-bars" (adding further ambiguities), subjected to every manner of formal distress. Through 1978, a remarkable number of freshly conceived treatments was invented.

In 1978, an emotional upheaval provoked Rothenberg to create images that were less controlled, less distanced, less coolly measured. Sometimes they seemed startlingly new even to their creator. Images of a "head within a head" began to appear, connotative of extreme emotional anguish, of choking despair. The horse now came to be presented more illusionistically, not profiled and outlined, but projected straight on and twisted, even with its legs upside down. Paradoxically, as the horse was increasingly manipulated, it became more formalized, more emotive—and abstract: "In one painting, I took the head and placed it between [the horse's] legs," Rothenberg commented recently. In another painting, "it was swallowed by the leg. I did this too by turning the horse frontally, in other words, the horse fronted and started to come apart..." In place of the earlier geometry of linear abstraction came imagery of the horse's legs, then bones. Such investigations led to images of human heads with intrusive linear elements; these included a "smoker" and, ominously, a head with eyes and mouth being penetrated. Apertures were explored, uncomfortably. "I was trying to figure out what a head is," the artist has commented, her interest was clearly more than anatomical. As underlying geometric structure waned and emotional tone was heightened in Rothenberg's paintings, her handling of paint became freer, more direct, and expressive. The "theory and the formula" of the earlier work, connected to a fading impulse in American art, gave way in 1979 to a further stylistic shift, which could be measured in terms of the deformation of the subject. In *The Hulk* of that year, the horse's legs have been transformed into a tree.

This process of metamorphosis reached its climax in 1980. In five immense canvases of that year, each approximately ten by ten feet, *hands* and *heads* were fused. "I figured that's what a painter is—a hand and a head," Rothenberg has commented. The artist's vigorous resolve alludes to the increasing importance for her of emotional over both technical and analytical concerns. Tied to this liberating stage in her work was her wish to "invent what a figure is," or to reinvent a viable, modern figurative imagery. "Dream-like or humanoid figures," as Rothenberg has called them, began to appear, as in *Red Slippers* of 1980–81. The horse drifted away, and with it the sense of series, since consistency had become less important than a search for another order. Rothenberg's exploration of the tonal situations of individual canvases, such as her attempt to make drastic jumps from black to white, began here. Some canvases were dominated by a single color to differentiate the head from the hand (allowing a jump from red to blue to black, generally). Concomitant with these color contrasts, Rothenberg opposed hollows and solids in this series—a far cry from the uniformly shallow space of the horse paintings. And in place of the iconic and unassertive qualities of the earlier works, which implied—in the artist's view—"too simple a relationship



North Wall, 1976. Acrylic and tempera on canvas. 68 1/4 x 116 in. Private collection, New York.



The Hulk, 1979. Acrylic and flashe on canvas. 89 × 138 in. Barry Lowen

between image and viewer, a "confrontational relationship" characterizes the "heads and hands."

In 1981, Rothenberg rented a house on a creek near Greenport, Long Island, for herself and her young daughter, Maggie Trakas. Her paintings soon began to depict the outdoors: boats, reflections in water, swans, outdoor activities (*Maggie's Cartwheel*) appeared. The disposition of bodies in space was examined; actions—especially slow and repeated motions—were depicted. To better express fleeting and ephemeral sensations, Rothenberg had switched from acrylic to oil painting. She interpreted experiences such as "floating in a resting boat," sailing, doing calisthenics, on canvas. She reflects now that with acrylic, her surfaces were becoming too "belligent"; accidents and changes gradually had led to heavily built-up surfaces; she had painted "correctively." Now she wanted her surfaces to be less accidental and more subtle, finished, and mature. As "compulsive" imagery gave way to more elusive and ambitious configurations, Rothenberg's paint handling similarly loosened and opened up. (Rothenberg's stroke, especially with oil, is a wondrous thing, feathery but clear and sure, light-filled, and masterfully various as the individual mark in each canvas relates uniquely to the overall feeling of the image and the total canvas surface.)

Paintings begun last winter and finished this year are perhaps the most intense that Rothenberg has produced, suggesting to the viewer that the artist herself "doesn't fully understand" her own work, as indeed she commented recently. The focus of the new pictures is the human figure. Rothenberg has begun to address the problem of handling the figure by "reinventing it." For example, an exploration of the snowman figure—itsself a man-made image of man, an elemental work of art—has allowed the artist freedom to manipulate, invent, and "play around." Although obviously reminiscent to a degree of Rothenberg's approach to the horse motif, the figures in the new work—snowman, skater, "semi-figures" that fuse person and shadow or person and tree—are active carriers of feeling, not merely

passive victims of artistic manipulation. These images seem to arise from a fugue state. It is as if they intruded themselves onto the canvas and into shape precisely when the artist's consciousness slipped away. A tension between the depictive need and the abstractive urge was perhaps the dominant characteristic of the horse images. Rothenberg has declared: "I know the idea so well [that] I work on everything else. Then I have to bring that image back so people can see it." For the viewer, the artist is thus a magic conduit. A weird and demonic humor is experienced in this act—only partially a willful one—of conjuring.

Many of the smaller paintings from the '80s, including those in the current exhibition, contain extremely declarative figuration. In them, action is almost always associated with children. There are images related to toys (the tabs on cardboard figures). Play activities are frequently depicted (skating, sailing, making a snowman). These harmless pastimes are always informed by a sense of menace and peril. When figures touch each other, they fuse and create a new and vaguely ominous shape, such as an insect-like form. A child performing cartwheels is presented in time-sequence, so that its arrested motions suggest dueling figures. The snowman loses its head, the skater's figure eight threatens to engulf the skater, other images are seen to be "snared in an X-ray light, or as if caught in the glare of headlights." Often light itself is the source of the peril: top light can swathe a figure in such a way as to make it lose its arms. Figures in unremarkable poses—taking off a coat, wearing a dress—are distorted by illumination (and also sometimes by the addition of a single colored section or by geometric shapes that assertively intrude into the figurative scene). The implied result of touching is joining, which is projected as a dangerous, albeit a comic-sinister, state of affairs. These works are also about "growing, about taking journeys," however, which is symbolized by the imagery of sailboats freely leading the artist into a "different avenue of painting."³

Rothenberg's most recent paintings are unified by a pervasive flickering light, rendered by gossamer flurries of paint. They are dream-like in mood, reminiscent of the reproduced stills of film photography. The artist has charged their atmosphere by giving them a definite sense of location, which has come to replace strict figure/ground relationships. Finally, the new paintings achieve resolution when the total surface is infected by a characteristic calm. Figures embody and transcend maximum ambiguity much as the horse in Rothenberg's earliest paintings was made to survive extreme pictorial onslaught.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from interviews with the artist by the author in February 1983.

2. Hayden Herrera. Review in *Art in America*, vol. 64, no. 5, September–October 1976, p. 108.

3. Interview with Hayden Herrera in *Art in America*, vol. 70, no. 11, December 1982, pp. 65, 139.

Checklist

Blue Bars, 1982

Oil on canvas

87 x 52 in.

Private collection

Beggar, 1982

Oil on canvas

39½ x 50½ in.

Maggie Trakas

Patches, 1982

Oil on canvas

87 x 117 in.

Doris and Charles Saatchi, London

Black Dress, 1982–83

Oil on canvas

67 x 73 in.

Private collection

Overcoat, 1982–83

Oil on canvas

44 x 39½ in

Private collection

Three Trees, 1983

Oil on canvas

86½ x 87 in.

Courtesy Willard Gallery, New York

Snowman, 1983

Oil on canvas

79 x 86½ in

Courtesy Willard Gallery, New York

The Monk, 1983

Oil on canvas

104 x 68 in.

Private collection

A Terrible Arc, 1983

Oil on canvas

90 x 47 in

Private collection

Biography

Born in Buffalo, New York, 1945

B.F.A., Cornell University, 1966

George Washington University, 1967

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1983 Willard Gallery, New York

1982 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

1981 Akron Art Museum

"Five Heads," Willard Gallery, New York

1980 Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Cologne, West Germany

Mayor Gallery, London, England

1979 Willard Gallery, New York

1978 Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis

"Matrix," University Art Museum, Berkeley
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

1977 Willard Gallery, New York

1976 Willard Gallery, New York

1975 "Three Large Paintings," 112 Greene Street Gallery,
New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

1983 "American Accents," Gallery Stratford, Ontario, Canada
(cat.)

"Back to the U.S.A.," Kunstmuseum Luzern, Switzerland,
Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn, West Germany (cat.)

"Drawing Conclusions: A Survey of American Drawing,"
1958–1983, Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

"47th National Mid-Year Exhibition," The Butler Institute of
American Art, Youngstown (cat.)

"New York Painting Today," Three Rivers Arts Festival
(sponsored by Carnegie Institute), Pittsburgh

"1983 Biennial Exhibition," Whitney Museum of American
Art, New York (cat.)

"1983 National Drawing Invitational," Sarah Spurgeon Fine
Arts Gallery, Central Washington University, Ellensburg

"Prints from Blocks," The Museum of Modern Art, New
York (cat.)

"Tendencios en Nueva York," Palacio de Cristal, Madrid,
Spain (cat.)

1982 "Block Prints," Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York (cat.)

"The Expressionist Image," Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

"Figures of Mystery," The Queens Museum, New York

"Focus on the Figure: Twenty Years," Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York (cat.)

"Group Exhibition of American Painters," Akira Ikeda
Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

"Myth," Bonlow Gallery, New York

"New Figuration in America," Milwaukee Art Museum

"74th American Exhibition," The Art Institute of Chicago
(cat.)

"White and Black Drawings," Willard Gallery, New York

"Zeitgeist," Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, West Germany

1981 "Animals in American Art 1880–1980," Nassau County
Museum of Fine Art, Roslyn Harbor (cat.)

"Contemporary Drawings: In Search of an Image," Univer-
sity Art Museum, Santa Barbara (cat.)

"Lane, Obuck, Rothenberg, Sultan, Torreano," Young-
Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

"A New Bestiary: Animal Imagery in Contemporary Art,"
Institute of Contemporary Art, Virginia Museum of Fine
Arts, Richmond



Three Trees, 1983

- 1980 "Robert Moskowitz, Susan Rothenberg, Julian Schnabel," Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland; Frankfurter Kunstverein, West Germany; Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark (cat.)
- "La Biennale di Venezia 1980," International and United States Pavilions, Venice, Italy (cat.)
- "Horror Pleni," Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy
- "Lois Lane, Susan Rothenberg," Clarke-Benton Gallery, Santa Fe
- "Painting and Sculpture Today 1980," Indianapolis Museum of Art (cat.)
- "Pictures in New York Today," Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy
- "Selections from Art Lending," The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- "Tendances Actuelles de L'Art Americain," Daniel Templon, Paris, France
- 1979 "American Painting, The Eighties," Grey Art Gallery, New York University; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (cat.)
- "The New American Painting I," Janie C. Lee Gallery, Houston
- "New Image Painting," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (cat.)

- "1979 Biennial Exhibition," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (cat.)
- "Visionary Images," Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago (cat.)
- 1977 "Abstract Images," Willard Gallery, New York
- "American Drawn and Matched," The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- "Critic's Choice," Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica
- "Extraordinary Women," The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- "May Painting Show," P. S. 1, Long Island City
- "New Acquisitions," The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- "New York: The State of Art," New York State Museum, Albany (cat.)
- "Painting 1975-76-77," Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville; Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (cat.)
- "Susan Rothenberg/Judith Ornstein," Willard Gallery, New York
- 1976 "Animals," Holly Solomon Gallery, New York; Jared Sable Gallery, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- "New Work/New York," Fine Arts Gallery, California State University, Los Angeles
- "Selections," Willard Gallery, New York
- 1975 Willard Gallery, New York
- 1974 "New Talent," Sachs Gallery, New York

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Exhibition Itinerary:

- Los Angeles County Museum of Art
September 1–October 16, 1983
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
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- Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh
January 21–March 18, 1984
- Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
April–May 1984

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